Schedule

Manhood Initiation in Ozuzu Clan, Rivers State: A Semiotic Analysis of Traditional Songs

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Abstract

This study examines the communicative roles and cultural significance of traditional songs performed during the initiation into manhood among the Ozuzu clan in Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. Anchored in qualitative ethnographic methodology, the research draws on data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and visual clips of ritual songs, via social media. The study employs thematic and semiotic analyses to uncover the symbolic meanings and communicative strategies embedded in the performances. Findings reveal that initiation songs serve not merely as ritual accompaniment but as powerful tools for moral instruction, identity formation, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Through the use of repetition, and symbolic imagery, the songs encode values of courage, responsibility, endurance, and social cohesion. The songs also function as oral archives, preserving ancestral wisdom and reinforcing communal norms within a participatory framework characterized by repetitive call-and-response structures. Drawing on the Ethnography of Communication and Semiotic Theory, the study highlights how these oral texts constitute a critical cultural mechanism for male socialization and cultural preservation. The research contributes to the documentation of endangered oral traditions and fills a scholarly gap by focusing on the relatively undocumented Ozuzu clan's initiation practices. It recommends sustenance of the initiation culture, effective preservation of artifacts and adequate media exposure for global visibility among others. The study reinforces the argument that

traditional songs are vital communicative instruments for reinforcing and sustaining indigenous identity in a rapidly globalizing world.

Keywords: Initiation Songs, Ozuzu Clan, Oral Tradition, Manhood Initiation, Cultural Preservation

Introduction

Across many African societies, rites of passage serve as pivotal cultural milestones through which individuals are inducted into new social roles and responsibilities. Among such rites, the initiation into manhood is particularly significant, marking the symbolic transition from adolescence to adulthood. In the Ozuzu clan of Etche in Rivers State, Nigeria, this transition is richly embedded in oral performances, notably traditional songs, which carry deep communicative, educative, and symbolic meanings.

Songs in African cultures are not merely artistic expressions; they are vehicles for cultural transmission and socialization. As Finnegan (2012) affirms, “oral literature in Africa is not just for entertainment but an essential medium through which communities educate and preserve traditions. In the context of initiation rites, songs often encode messages about courage, discipline, loyalty, social roles, and community values, all of which are integral to becoming a man in traditional societies (Okpewho, 1992).

The communicative power of these songs lies not only in their lyrical content but also in their rhythmic patterns, performance style, and symbolic

language, which together create a rich tapestry of meaning. Barber (1997) argues that African oral forms are “dense with layered meanings that are best understood through close attention to performance context and audience interpretation.” Thus, in the Ozuzu clan, the songs used during initiation ceremonies are more than cultural artifacts; they are living texts that convey unwritten codes about masculinity and communal life.

Despite the richness of these oral traditions, there is a notable gap in scholarly documentation and analysis of the communicative roles of initiation songs in many Nigerian communities, including the Ozuzu clan, also known as *Mba-Asa*. This study seeks to fill that gap by interrogating the semiotic, communicative, and cultural functions of traditional songs during Ozuzu’s manhood initiation rites.

Statement of the Problem

Traditional initiation songs in African societies, particularly among the Ozuzu clan, have largely been preserved through oral transmission. However, modernization, religious influences, and cultural neglect threaten their continuity and obscure their meanings. While these songs continue to be used during initiation ceremonies, their communicative value, symbolism, and socio-cultural significance are often overlooked or misunderstood by younger generations. The continued neglect of the communicative significances of traditional songs in Africa, and particularly

Ozuzu Clan in Etche land, is a threat to the history, culture and traditional heritage of the people.

According to Finnegan (2012) the place of oral literature such as traditional songs in educating, mobilising and preserving traditions in African communities cannot be over-emphasised. Finnegan's position underscores the need for African communities to retain their cultures and traditions because not to do so will threaten identity formation, and cultural continuity, as well as engender cultural erosion tin today's globalised world.

Also, in his study about manhood initiation in the Nama and Xhosa traditions in South Africa,, Eze (2021) reported that adulthood initiation practices should be enlivened in African communities to preserve cultural songs, send moral messages and teach the initiates to realize their full potential as adults.

Finnegan and Eze's studies dwelt mainly on African communities outside Nigeria, and were not about manhood initiation rites in Ozuzu Clan, Etche. The implication is that there is dearth of research on the communicative significance of traditional songs in the area. The twin issues of negligence of traditional songs and the lack of research in the area are critical reasons that make this research effort most crucial.

Objectives of the Study

Generally, this study aimed to examine the communicative significances of manhood initiation songs in Ozuzu Clan, Etche, Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine the lyrical content and symbolic meaning of traditional initiation songs in Ozuzu clan.

2. Analyze the communicative roles that traditional songs play during initiation into manhood.

3. Explore how traditional manhood initiation songs reinforce cultural values, masculinity, and social responsibilities.

4. Assess the roles of traditional songs in preserving cultural values in contemporary times.

Research Questions

1. What are the dominant themes and messages encoded in the initiation songs of the Ozuzu clan?

2. How do these songs communicate cultural values and expectations of manhood?

3. In what ways do the songs facilitate the socialization process of the initiates?

4. How can understanding these songs contribute to cultural preservation and revitalization?

Operational Clarification of Keywords

Initiation songs: these are special and seasonal songs adopted mainly for the purpose of the Ozuzu clan’s manhood initiation.

Ozuzu Clan: also known as *Mba Asa* - one of the six clans that made up the Etche ethnic nationality in Rivers State, Nigeria; with seven communities, namely: Isu, Ozuzu, Ogida, Orwu, Egbu, Ihie and Elele.

Oral Tradition: Ozuzu clan's culture, transmitted from generation to generation without a formal documentation.

Manhood Initiation: An annual ritual aimed at culturally inducting and grooming boys into men in Ozuzu clan. It is done collectively but independently by the communities.

Scope of the Study

The study ideologically dwelt on determining the communicative imports of traditional manhood initiation songs in Ozuzu Clan, popularly known as *Mba Asa*. Ozuzu Clan is located in Etche Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. This area is renowned for its vibrant cultural practices, particularly the male initiation rites. Its selection is based on the availability of participants directly involved in or knowledgeable about traditional initiation ceremonies and song performances.

Literature Review

African traditional Songs: A Communicative Incursion

In African societies, traditional songs serve as powerful mediums of communication. They encode communal values, instruct on moral behavior, and reinforce group identity (Finnegan, 2012). These songs are typically structured around local idioms, proverbs, and symbolic language, allowing them to carry culturally resonant meanings. Akpabot (1986) notes that music in Nigeria is "inseparable from the rituals and ceremonies of life," emphasizing its role in rites of passage, especially in rural communities.

According to Okpewho (1992), oral traditions, songs in particular, serve as repositories of cultural knowledge and are integral to the transmission of unwritten societal rules. Initiation songs, therefore, do not merely entertain; they educate, instruct, and initiate.

Initiation into manhood, a practice rooted in the concept of rites of passage, as outlined by van Gennep (1960), encompasses three main stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. Within this framework, the initiation into manhood is a socially constructed process, whereby the initiate is taught the responsibilities, virtues, and expectations associated with adulthood. Turner (1969) further elaborates on the luminal stage, where the initiate is most receptive to symbolic instruction, including that provided through ritual songs. However, Eze (2021) agrees that the manner of the initiation practice may be different but the goals of the process are the same.

In contexts like the Ozuzu clan of Rivers State, initiation rites are structured with various symbolic elements, especially songs that communicate expectations of courage, responsibility, loyalty, and self-control. The songs play a critical role in guiding initiates through this liminal phase by embedding teachings about bravery, discipline, loyalty, and community service. Barber (1997) views these oral performances as “cultural scripts” that frame and reinforce communal ideologies.

The semiotic theory of Barthes (1967) provides a useful lens for analyzing how songs operate through signs and symbols. In initiation songs, meanings are often conveyed through metaphor, allegory, and symbolic references to animals, nature, and historical events. These symbols encode deeper cultural values, making the songs multi-layered texts that require cultural competence to decode.

Barber (1997) stresses the importance of analyzing performance context, arguing that African oral forms must be understood as events, where meaning emerges not only from content but also from how, when, and by whom the content is delivered.

Empirical studies have confirmed that music is central to initiation rituals across various African cultures. Olatunji (2010), studying Yoruba initiation rites, found that songs were crucial in instilling ethical values and gender roles in initiates. These songs often used storytelling, repetition, and poetic devices to reinforce key messages about adulthood.

In a similar vein, Nketia (1974) documents how the Akan of Ghana used music in rituals to affirm social bonds and cultural continuity. The songs performed during male initiation ceremonies served as both public proclamations and private lessons for initiates.

Enekwe (1987), in his study of Igbo masquerade performance, emphasized the didactic nature of ritual songs, which often blend history, myth, and

morality. His findings showed that these performances not only entertain but also encode unspoken cultural values, particularly surrounding manhood, bravery, and silence. Eze (2015) demonstrates that traditional songs strengthen a sense of belonging and continuity, thereby functioning as instruments of indoctrination during transition rites.

More recently, Okonkwo (2019) investigated ritual songs among the Nsukka Igbo, observing how the songs employed call-and-response techniques and symbolic references to reinforce themes of duty, endurance, and collective identity. These songs were instrumental in shaping the social consciousness of the initiates.

While oral performance remains a potent tool for cultural education, scholars have raised concerns about cultural erosion due to globalization and religious influences. Oduro (2020) argues that many traditional African rites including initiation songs are becoming diluted or lost altogether, especially in urbanized or Christian-dominated regions. This erosion threatens the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and necessitates urgent documentation and scholarly analysis.

This concern is particularly relevant for Ozuzu clan’s initiation songs, which remains under-documented in scholarly literature. Existing research largely focuses on Yoruba, Akan and other Igbo subgroups, leaving Ozuzu clan’s unique initiation practices. Addressing this gap is essential for both cultural

preservation and the advancement of indigenous communication scholarship.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theories:

1. Ethnography of Communication (Dell Hymes, 1974):

This framework emphasizes the importance of understanding communication within its cultural context. It considers who is speaking, to whom, in what context, and for what purpose. Applied to this study, it helps uncover how initiation songs are structured, performed, and interpreted within the *Mba-Asa* initiation setting.

2. Semiotic Theory (Roland Barthes, 1967):

Semiotics enables the analysis of signs and symbols embedded in communication. Initiation songs are rich in metaphor, symbolism, and performative elements. Barthes' theory provides tools to decode the multiple layers of meaning within the songs, revealing their role in constructing social identities and moral expectations.

Method

This study adopted a mixed design approach to ensure adequate responses to the questions that have been established. The participant observation and survey designs were used to collect data. While the researchers immersed themselves within the research environment during the manhood initiation rites celebration in Ozuzu Clan, interviews were conducted on 15

persons chosen purposively from the communities that make up Ozuzu Clan. The interviewees were mainly older initiates, clan heads, chiefs, opinion leaders and elite. Also, the researchers adhered strictly to ethical research standards by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, respecting cultural norms and restrictions. Participant observation and interview guides which were used as instruments for the study; passed through blind peer review and were certified by a research instrumentation expert. Data collected from the field were mainly texts, and were also subjected to member-checking to ensure post-data validity. Data analysis was done using the thematic analysis method, the method involved recognition of recurring themes, coding and aligning such themes to existing body of knowledge.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyses data collected through interviews, participant observations.

Instructive Implications of Lyrics in Traditional Manhood Initiation Songs

S/ No	Participants	Responses	Analysis
1	Interviewee 2	The songs are instructive about adulthood and its responsibilities in (*Mba Asa*) Ozuzu clan, in Etche.	The participants are generally of the view that the songs used during the *Mba Asa* manhood initiation rites are powerful tools to teach the initiates about responsibilities, good morals, and endurance. The songs also prepare the initiates to be good
2	Interviewee 1	The songs used during the initiation process are primarily educational and	

		moralistic.	ambassadors and repositories of *Mba Asa* culture.
3	Interviewee 5	The songs tell the boys what it means to be a man — to endure pain, respect elders, and protect the community	
4	Interviewee 8	We don't just talk to them; we sing these values into them.	
5	Interviewee 10	that songs were sung at critical moments of endurance tasks and other symbolic trials	
6	Interviewee 9	The initiation song is a beautiful display of unity, culture and tradition; bringing people together in joy and celebration	

Cultural Memory and Inter-generational Continuity in Traditional Manhood Initiation Songs

S/ No	Participants	Responses	Analysis
10	Interviewee 13	Initiation songs keep our culture alive, they do so more than the rituals themselves	The participants believe in the age-long meanings that initiation songs in Ozuzu Clan carry. They insist that initiation songs are a veritable storage of their culture which has been passed down to several generations.
11	Interviewee 15	The songs are age-long, and have been passed down through oral tradition to several generations	
12	Interviewee 14	Over time, young people have grown into adults, and have learnt to chant the songs, so it is part of our lifestyle.	

Idiomatic Symbolism of Lyrics in Traditional Manhood Initiation Songs

Exemplar 1 : *Onye amuru, ya muta ibe ya"*

S/N	Participant	Participant Interpretation	Signifier
1	Interviewee 2	He who is born should born another	He who is culturally groomed, should groom others for the sustenance of the Ozuzu clan's cultural heritage
2	Interviewee 4	He who is taught should teach others	
3	Interviewee 10	He who is shown the way should show others	
4.	Interviewee 12	The boys should be prepared to become men	

Exemplar: 2 *Anyi bu Mba Asa"*

S/N	Participant	Participants Interpretations	Signifier
1	Interviewee 2	We are from Ozuzu clan in Etche	This is our identity; the culture is our brainchild, rooted in our history
2	Interviewee 9	This is who we are	
3	Interviewee 11	This is our story	
4.	Interviewee 8	Our culture is our history	

Exemplar: 3 *Onye a di tuo anya o na a chwu nkwu*

S/N	Participant	Participants Interpretations	Signifier
1	Interviewee 2	He who refused to participate in the initiation process cannot play a role	Anyone who has not gone through the initiation process cannot participate in the *Mba Asa* culture
2	Interviewee 12	He who refused to participate is already excluded	
3	Interviewee 14	He who refused to identify with us is a stranger	
4.	Interviewee 5	He who rejects his culture cannot partake in the same culture	

Exemplar 4 : Ogbu na efu, aka a pu la ya

S/N	Participant	Participant Interpretations	Signifier
1	Interviewee 2	He who intends killing the innocent must not succeed	Our culture abhors the killing of human beings or any dangerous acts that endangers human lives. This reflects a core theme of responsibility and dignity, which is central to the initiation rite
2	Interviewee 10	The blood of the innocent must never be shed	
3	Interviewee 4	We do not kill humans	
4.	Interviewee 6	The conspiracy of the evil minded can never succeed	

Exemplar 5 : Ugo e'bere

S/N	Participant	Participants Interpretations	Signifier
1	Interviewe e 2	The eagle has perched	The eagle here symbolizes the ideal male - strong, noble, and morally upright. This refers to the ripe moment for decision, watchfulness, wisdom, and elevated moral standing; qualities expected of adult men in the community
2	Interviewe e 7	The eagle has landed	
3	Interviewe e14	The eagle is here	
4.	Interviewe e10	The eagle has come	

Exemplar 6: Miri e'ru ju le igwe

S/N	Participant	Participants Interpretations	Signifier
1	Interviewe e 2	The rain has darkened the cloud	The rain and dark cloud represent uncertainty and moments for preparations to tackle challenges. The real time to separate the
2	Interviewe e	The cloud is heavily pregnant with rains	
3	Interviewe e	The cloud is piled up with rains	

4.	Interviewe e	The rain is in the cloud	boys from men. These symbolic expressions make communicatio n engaging.

Signified Meanings of Call-and Response Lyrics in Ozuzu Clan Manhood Initiation Songs

S/ N	**Participan t**	**Lyrics**	**Participants Interpretations**	**Signifier**
1	Interviewe e 2	Lead: “Anyi bu Mba Asa” Chorus: “O’weh weh O’weh!”	The call and response pattern depicts affirmation of cultural dignity	Observed initiation songs followed a call-and-response structure, where a lead singer repetitively chants a line, and other participants respond in a predetermined pattern, showing affirmation.
2	Interviewe e 12		It depicts unity and reinforcement of identity	
3	Interviewe e 13		It shows concord and unity of purpose	
4.	Interviewe e 9		It shows agreement, acceptance of culture	

Symbolic Clauses in Traditional Manhood Initiation of Ozuzu Clan

Exampler1: Onye ishi a’ta gbara n’gwa

S/ N	Participant	Participants Responses	Signifier
1	Interviewe	The blind is long	He who is

	e 2	asleep	ignorant of his culture has lost touch with his root.
2	Interviewe e	The blind cannot see	
3	Interviewe e	The blind lives in abstraction	
4.	Interviewe e	The blind lives in imagination	

Exemplar 2: *A'tu anya ma amara he*

S/ N	Participant	Participants Responses	Signifier
1	Interviewe e 2	The manhood initiation is a school	The culture initiates boys into manhood, as ambassadors of their cultural heritage. These symbols reflect the clan's worldview on masculinity,
2	Interviewe e	The initiation is to prepare boys to men	
3	Interviewe e	Manhood initiation is for cultural education	
4.	Interviewe e	The initiation is for cultural certification	

			social order, and survival which are crucial for decoding the deeper meanings of the songs.

Results and Findings

From the data presented above, the study has revealed that initiation songs in Ozuzu clan's manhood initiation rites are multifunctional cultural instruments that go beyond ritual entertainment. This is because they serve a communicative role towards transmitting the values and cultures of the people. They are also used as socializing agents for shaping culture using imbued semiotic texts that portray cultural symbolism and preservation which are tools for intergenerational identity.

The findings of this study further reflect the core theme of responsibility, preservation and dignity in human culture as has become evident in the Ozuzu clan initiation rite. The didactic function of the songs that exemplified the study aligns with the position of Olatunji's (2010), where songs were shown to reinforce masculine virtues during traditional initiation ceremonies. It further aligns with the theory of Barthes (1967)

which dealt with connotative meanings, where cultural signs carry deeper ideological implications. The findings of the study also portrayed elements of communal bonding and a public affirmation of Ozuzu Clan's cultural acceptance and responsibility. It also fosters active participation and memorisation. Such interaction confirms the observation of Gee (2014) that discourse patterns reinforce social roles and collective consciousness, suggesting that traditional songs are vital for cultural continuity because the lyrics contain embedded historical references to past leaders, taboos, and ancestral values, and effectively functioning as oral archives. The above supports the opinion of Barber (1997) which held that oral texts serve as living documents that carry collective memory and identity.

Based on the conversation above, the following findings were made:

1. That the initiation songs highlight responsibility, courage, discipline, unity, respect for elders and other cultural values.
2. That songs used during manhood initiation rites in Ozuzu Clan function through lyrical symbolic, repetition, performance context, and communal participation to achieve expected meanings.
3. That the songs serve as moral compasses to the younger generation to ensure cultural continuity
4. That the songs used at manhood initiation in Ozuzu Clan are used for facilitation of cultural re-engineering among the people.

Conclusion

The research concludes that initiation songs in Ozuzu clan are not mere ritualistic embellishments, but powerful communicative artifacts that transmit cultural values, instruct younger men on societal expectations, and reinforce the identity of the clan. Through their symbolic use of lyrics, language, rhythm, structure, and performance context, these songs facilitate the transformation of boys into socially responsible men.

The study contributes to the preservation and scholarly understanding of Ozuzu clan's oral traditions, filling a significant gap in Nigeria's ethno-musicology and cultural research. It also reinforces the importance of Ozuzu folkloric documentation, an important exercise which has become an endangered part of the peoples' oral tradition. This will be a strategy for sustaining indigenous identity in a rapidly globalised world.

Recommendations

The study recommended that:

1. the Ozuzu manhood initiation rites should be sustained in the interest of the values that it promotes

2. the initiation songs in Ozuzu Clan should be documented for effective preservation

3. more media exposure should be given to the initiation ceremonies to give it a global outlook

4. a museum should be established for effective preservation of artifacts used for the initiation rites.

5. a robust community-based awareness campaign should be organised periodically to sensitise the younger generation to accept the tradition.

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